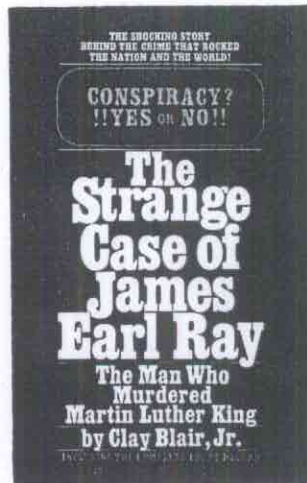


BOOKS



Instant-book editor Jaffe (left), author Blair: No sooner done than said

Extra!

In these days of instant news coverage, a thing is no sooner done than said. And it's true not only of newspapers, magazines, radio and TV, but of books as well. "The Strange Case of James Earl Ray" is the latest example of such "instant" books. The first account of Martin Luther King's assassin rolled off the presses on March 18, one week after Ray's foreshortened trial in Memphis. The author, Clay Blair Jr., former editor of The Saturday Evening Post, had been waiting for the final "news peg" since June, when the work was commissioned by paperback house Bantam Books.

The major part of the book—a chronological account of Ray's life from his birth in 1928 to his capture in June 1968—had been finished by last November, the original date for the trial. Then Ray fired his lawyer; the trial was postponed. On Monday, March 10, it began again, catching everyone by surprise. Blair flew to Memphis from a sailing trip. Even though the trial opened and closed in 144 minutes, Bantam decided to go ahead with the book. By 5 o'clock Thursday, March 13, Blair's final manuscript and two editors were on their way to the W.F. Hall presses in Chicago.

Theory: Sleuth Blair traveled more than 15,000 miles tracking down the facts of Ray's life. "I was curious about this guy, about what makes an assassin," he told NEWSWEEK's Annette Grant. He read court records and police blotters, talked to more than 400 people including family, friends, class- and prison-mates, compiling a fact file of more than 2,000 cards. He even interviewed (if only through a screen door darkly) Ray's father, who had been assumed dead.

Blair inclines toward the theory that Ray was alone in the crime, proposing that "he was a victim of circumstances," bitter at being denied self-esteem and

recognition. As a result, Ray wanted to "make a big score" and "draw as much attention to himself as possible." Perhaps, Blair suggests, Ray imagined himself as something of a cross between James Bond and Lee Harvey Oswald. Questions about a possible conspiracy are left unanswered or equivocal. Blair's book is the journalistic expansion of a headline story, and, as such, leans more on description and speculation than on evaluation. As though aware of that, Blair, in Chicago last week, chimed in with those calling for a blue-ribbon investigation that might clear up the conspiracy question for good and all.

Umbrella: Not all of Bantam's instant books, called "Extras," have been about murders and trials. Out of 22, only three (on Candy Mosler, Dr. Sam Sheppard and James Earl Ray) have exploited sensational crimes. The remaining are about equally divided between documents of American history, such as the Warren report, and general topics, such as Robert F. Kennedy's "To Seek a Newer World," Dick Gregory's "Write Me In!" and Che Guevara's Bolivian diary. According to Bantam's editorial director Marc Jaffe, "We're looking for a subject for which the public has a predisposition, something with a large umbrella of publicity surrounding an event."

To produce an Extra, the editorial offices and the presses work around the clock; procedures that would normally take six to eight weeks are condensed into a few days. "It's just a case of concentration," says John Falvey of W.F. Hall Co., which prints all of Bantam's books. "We bring in as much manpower as we can fit into the composing room and work straight through until the job is done." Bantam admits to spending "a substantial sum" for such services, while Falvey estimates that the Ray book, which had a first run of 300,000, cost Bantam "in excess of \$10,000 extra."

Not all of Bantam's Extras have en-

joyed equal success. "Strike Zion!", the first book on the Arab-Israeli war, sold like hotcakes at first, but soon tapered off. A few, like the recent University of Colorado report on UFO's, scarcely sold at all—probably, according to promotion director Fred Klein, "because it was so long and so specialized." Others have proved surprisingly durable. "Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders" has 1,710,000 copies in print and "sold well on the newsstands first, then was ordered by businesses and corporations, and finally has a brand-new market as a textbook." Bantam hand-tailors the distribution of Extras, airlifting them to major cities as soon as they are off the press. Many sell so fast that reorders are requested the same day.

Blackout: Even though the Bantam staff now treats Extras almost as routine—"It's nice to have things more exciting every once in a while"—there are times when "fate seems against the operation." "The National Citizenship Test," designed to coincide with a CBS special, was effectively sabotaged by the 1965 blackout, which caused the show to be canceled. The following day, Bantam editors, unable to stop the book's distribution, furtively collected copies from the CBS Building newsstand so that the top brass wouldn't see the debacle when arriving for work. Just one month earlier, the publisher, teamed with The New York Times staff, decided to do a souvenir book on the Pope's visit to New York. As the Times was on strike, Bantam set up a makeshift newsroom in its own offices and imported the staff. "Everyone was there," recalls art director Len Leone, "even Times managing editor Clifton Daniel, peering over writers' shoulders."

The James Earl Ray book was produced under similar circumstances and pressure. Still in his sailing clothes, Blair wrote continuously from the time the trial ended. "I knew there would be a wild 72 hours at the end, but there was no panic, just exhilaration," says Blair, who has nothing but praise for the unflappable and efficient Bantam staff. "But the book would never have been done without coffee and cigarettes. I smoked so much that I'm going to give it up. Toward the end I was living on Alka-Seltzer." Marc Jaffe, who had picked Blair for the job, said calmly, "I knew he could do it all along. Clay is an experienced journalist, a professional with the right [Southern] background to understand Ray. Also, he's used to writing under pressure." Blair's answer: "It was a great book to do—but I wouldn't want to do another one soon."